IN OTTAWA, New Democrat MPs are busy calculating their pensions. They suspect that thanks to Bob Rae, many won’t be around after the next federal election.

In the union movement, an old debate has been revived. The question is not whether labor should criticize Rae — that’s now a given. Rather labor is asking whether Rae’s government has done so much harm to the NDP that the party is beyond redemption.

The Ontario Federation of Labor argues that it can, in the words of Canadian Union of Public Employees head Judy Darcy, “take back” the NDP and return it to its roots.

But Canadian Labor Congress head Bob White has hinted he’s interested in refocusing labor away from formal party politics (and the NDP) and towards extra-parliamentary action.

At the centre of all of this is Rae, almost certainly already on the shortlist for leader of the federal NDP. Few believe Rae could afford to lose his government under such circumstances, even if that were his aim.

HAPPIER DAYS: Premier Bob Rae could count on the unflagging support last summer of labor leaders Bob White, left, and Frank McAnally, right. This year, the labor movement is accusing him of destroying the NDP’s traditional roots.
party politics (and the NDP) and towards extra-parliamentary action. To the centre of all of this is Rae. Almost single-handedly, this slight bundle of contradictions has caused chaos inside his party.

The Ontario Premier's unrepentant disavowal of traditional New Democrat policies, his enthusiastic embrace of a more conservative agenda, and the eloquent way in which he pursues this agenda have caused consternation inside the NDP from coast to coast.

Nowhere is the consternation more intense than inside the federal party. For the Rae experience has convinced many voters, particularly in Ontario, that the NDP has no clothes, that its policies are bankrupt, its moral crusades ultimately empty.

What other conclusions is one to draw? When asked why the Ontario government has abandoned almost everything it stood for in opposition — public auto insurance, job creation above fiscal restraint, the principle of collective bargaining, pension reform, industrial strategy, a better deal for the poor — high-level New Democrats just shrug. They say their opposition platform was impractical, a way to win votes.

They say they were never serious. Or as Rae has said, "That was when."

For anyone thinking of voting NDP in the upcoming federal election, this is sobering. Audrey McLaughlin's federal New Democrats say they will put the jobless first, but so did Rae. The federal NDP says its plans are serious, tested, and that if it won it could handle governing. So too did Rae.

But in reality, the Ontario New Democrats never expected to win power. They were unprepared when they did. At the first sign of trouble, they jettisoned much of their own platform and adopted instead whatever agenda happened to be around — in this case that of a much better-prepared, shrewder and more sophisticated business class.

Many Ontarians who might have voted New Democratic federally this fall will cast their ballots elsewhere — not just because of the usual voter frustration with an incumbent provincial government. Rae's experience of the last three years has demonstrated that the NDP are not who they say they are.

It is a fundamental issue of credibility. The NDP nationally could have weathered this if the testing ground hadn't been Ontario — and if the central figure hadn't been Rae.

The striking exceptions — native rights, Saskatchewan — highlight Rae's fundamental objective as a movement was the establishment of a more equitable society. Since that is still the main objective of the NDP, if it isn't, I've been in the wrong party for a long time. A key word in that sentence is "move."

Most in the NDP think of it as a more than a party. They think of it as a crusade.

But as party member Craig Smith told The Star's Kelly Toughill at a campaign event, "We're hiking in the same direction on the Commonwealth, on the Constitution." The party and the country is what Rae has done; he has moved with the mood.

In Ontario, the mood is conservative. Most Ontarians think the government should concentrate on controlling its deficit. So, abandoning its long-held view on how economies work, that's what the Rae government is doing.

Most Ontarians think people are justifiably tired of the NDP's inconsistencies. And they are about to win. Rae retrenches, and the NDP's new leader has a mandate. But the NDP is not where it was before. Rae has won power, but it may be in a way that the party cannot win power ever again. Rae's victory means that the NDP's tradition of social democratic party in opposition, they are saying, than another conservative party in power.